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ABSTRACT

Based on a common sense approach to childrearing, the first of two booklets offers advice to Ponca parents on communicating with their children. Eleven rules of good parenting pertaining to parent and child communication are given. These rules include: be willing to talk about anything and everything with your children; remember the importance of honesty and parental example; do not condemn your children; do not assume your child understands what you mean; maintain mutual respect of each other; keep in touch with your children by discussing the day's events, personal problems on a regular basis; and do not let your lack of experience or standing in the community limit your involvement in your children's lives. Other rules offered are: teaching your children to communicate may mean a less strict strategy of raising them; include your children in your communication with your Creator; maintain a healthy outlook on life; and use silent communication. Concluding the booklet is an interview with an older Ponca woman who recounts traditional ways of childrearing. (ERB)

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How To Grow Useful Poncas

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Introduction and Communications

Produced by
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INTRODUCTION

It is common to hear on the Ponca Reservation people complaining about children running wild, causing trouble, and not listening to anyone. It seems that even parents who are good people and who have had good teachings are not always able to raise kids they can be proud of. No one knows what to do about it. Some rely on outside authorities, counselors, psychologists and treatment centers. Kids used to be shipped off to boarding schools in order to "straighten them up." Even that did not work. It is easy to give up, and accept that Ponca children have been "bad" for too long, that the reservation is a bad influence, that our tragic history destroyed our spirit, and that Ponca City is a tough place to live. These things are true enough. But it is also true that we have not concentrated enough on what we can do in our families to make our children strong enough and confident enough to withstand these influences.

The advice given in these booklets is based on a commonsense approach to child rearing. We all have our beliefs and religions which direct us in our values, but we need practical tips on the daily techniques, the little successes and habits which will accumulate into a good life pattern, and help us reach our ideals.

A quick look at what went wrong and destroyed good parenting. . . The federal government attempted to destroy our culture after they put us on a reservation at their mercy. They outlawed our dances, our religion, and our language. Worse, they forcibly took our children from us for boarding schools where they would try to turn their heads around and turn them against their families. This disruption was only one part of the system called colonialism. The other damages were to our tribal institutions, which withered with disuse. Our community as a whole was also isolated from its environment. We were prevented from dealing with the real world; everything was done for us by the government. This made us dependent and helpless. It made our men unconfident and incapable of action. They were forced to lead meaningless lives. It was forbidden to be Indian. It was impossible to be white. This psychology exists today, so there are few role models to look up to.

At the same time, we cannot blame the government for everything. Our poverty is real, they influenced that, but we have been poor before. We have come through disease and famine before that almost wiped us out. Spiritual poverty cannot be blamed on anyone else. Everyone gets knocked down, but staying down is our own fault.

We have also been affected by the influences in outside society that hurt family life. Rapid social change affects every village in the world, causing stresses and making it hard to cope. Traditional life is almost nonexistent; television brings ideas and images to the most isolated valley. In 1935, 70 percent of all Americans lived in rural areas. Today over 90 percent live in urban areas.

In former times, teaching values was possible through direct contact and observation. The child spent over six hours a day with parents and other kin, learning to make decisions, helping out, and getting on-the-job training for being an adult. Today, that period of contact is down to less than 14½ minutes, and over 12 minutes of that time is one-way negative communication: "Don't do this or that," "You better not . . ."

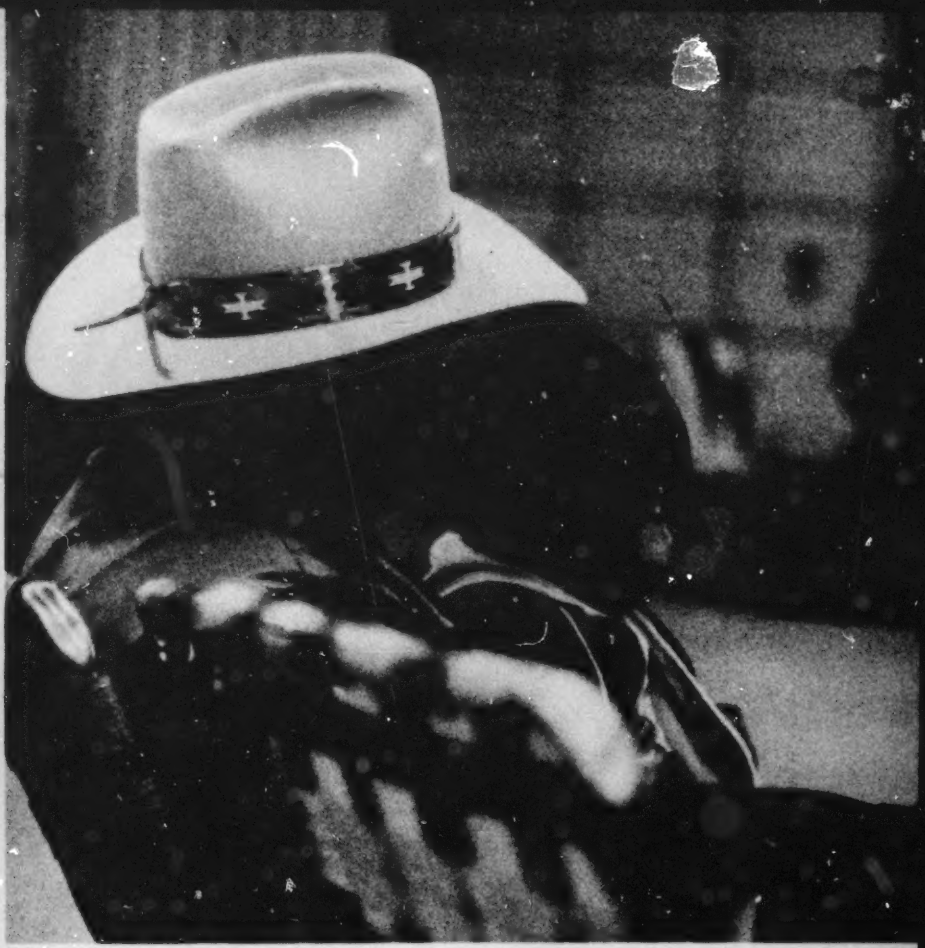
The result is that the modern child reaches maturity in his twenties, where he used to be able to function as an adult at age 16 or younger. The U.S. Army claims that one-half of its inductees are psychologically unfit for service. One-third of all Americans need professional outside intervention to learn how to live. All the problem behaviors, addictions, delinquency, and whatever people need help with stem from growing up to be overly dependent. A lot of people have never learned how to be capable, productive, and independent. Instead of throwing their arms up, we hope Ponca parents will look over these tips to develop the children they surely love. These "ounces" of prevention will be worth tons of cure later.

COMMUNICATION

Many of our social and family problems are caused by a lack of communication. Kids act out their confusion through delinquency. Parents don't have time to talk with children. Older brothers and sisters try to take up the slack. Some rules of good parenting:

1. You must be willing to talk about anything and everything with your children. Nothing should be hidden. Some things can be phrased delicately, but don't be evasive. Your children count on you more than anyone else for information.

2. Honesty always. Parental example is important. Children who are loose with the truth lose touch with reality. They run into greater adjustment problems later on with everybody.



3. Do not condemn your children. Condemn the behavior, not the person. Be always supportive when you must oppose their behavior. Show your concern when you are disciplining or correcting your child. Separate what the child does from who he is. Do not say, "**You** make me angry. **You** messed up again. Why can't **you** ever do what **you** are told." Each accusing "**you**" is a fist punching on the child. It makes him/her hostile, and aggressive, makes him/her want to hit you, someone smaller, a window, or the violence is turned inward, on themselves. Children are susceptible to depression, and depression can stunt and kill.

When correcting you can say "I'm surprised that you didn't do the dishes already because you are a reliable kid." supporting him/her while correcting him/her. He/she can understand better if you make clear your feelings and his/her involvement in them. For example, fill in these three blanks: I feel _____ about _____ because _____. I feel happy about how the kitchen looks because the floor was mopped. Or, I feel unhappy about the way the bedroom looks because you did not clean under the bed. Otherwise you are just mad and bossy and unpredictable. And the child does not get a good sense of his boundaries.

Teasing is acceptable, depending on the teaser's temperament and attitude. Hatefulness is hard to hide. If you are disappointed in your child's behavior, you will not be able to hide it, but you can use the opportunity to stress your love as basic. Encourage the child out of failure. Accept that the values of children are always different because of the needs of

each generation. Children do not need to have clean rooms—they feel differently about these things. When parents were 14 or 15 they were not uncomfortable about messy rooms. It is unreasonable to say "How can you live like this?" The answer is obvious: "Because it's easy." If you, as a parent, rush in and pick up all the clothes while you are yelling, you have aided and abetted. Just close the door and ask that it stay shut. Do not be indignant about things that are basically your needs anyway. It is hard to approach a tyrant, and you cannot afford to create distance if you do not have to.

4. Understanding is the goal. Do not always assume that the child knows what you mean. It will take much effort on your part to understand the child's perspective. Make him/her repeat and rephrase your instruction and requests. Reserve time for him/her. The next booklet will describe specific steps for better understanding and teaching.

5. Mutual respect is important. Children deserve respect even though they cannot be considered your equal. Democracy should be taught from an early age, and increasingly as they get older. Don't interrupt your children unnecessarily. Do not let them interrupt you in a demanding fashion at inappropriate times. Do not talk down, condescendingly, all the time. Be approving vocally. Be critical constructively. If you demonstrate a violation of your family values, recommunicate. Be dependable, clear, and positive in your values. Your rules will be followed closer and longer the more visible they are in your behavior.

Use teasing to draw children into activity, to get them out of their shells. Some chemical abuse is associated with isolation.

Make good use of traditional stories. They show the limits of behavior and make good use of life experience. They demonstrate values.

Explain your absences. If you are separated from their other parent, maintain your own rules with the child. The other's rules are okay in their place, but not with you. Divorced parents must try harder and stay closer to their children. This may be difficult and may be at the cost of personal freedom, but the rewards will be worth the effort. Use aunts, uncles, and elders regularly, but do not over-substitute.

6. Stay in constant touch with your children by discussing the day's events and personal problems on a regular basis. A family meeting weekly or every other week on a fixed schedule will be difficult to start, but will be looked forward to very soon, and will unify the family.

7. Do not let your lack of experience or standing in the community limit your involvement in your children's lives. Do not act in an inferior manner, especially with the school. Lack of self-esteem is contagious. So are confident attitudes. Take an interest in all their activities. Many studies have shown that even a little interest in their school, as an observer, can improve their schoolwork. Stand up for them when they say they have been abused in school or elsewhere. They must trust you and rely on you. If you do not stand up for them or yourself, they will not stand up for themselves later.

8. Teaching your children to communicate will mean you may have to abandon a strict strategy of raising them. You will have to learn to share your experiences, doubts, and feelings with them. You will have to lay down your armor in order to open up family situations to negotiation, compromise and cooperation, rather than always commanding and directing. Your vulnerablity and humanness will be a priceless gift which will enable them to have mature skills likewise. You must accept the possibility of learning from your children also. If you are so full of your own opinions, ideas, and convictions, you will have no space left inside to listen, and not interfere, which will let them grow.

9. Include your children in your communication with your Creator. We all have some kind of faith, even though we may not go to a church regularly. Your total beliefs, your universals, should be known to your children. They should know where to go to get support and healing. They learn best by example.

10. You should maintain a healthy outlook, not only for your sake, but because your community beliefs are transmitted to your children. If you are prejudiced or full of hate for other people, so will your children be also. Worse, they will accept superior attitudes as natural. When they are discriminated against or abused, they might accept it as natural. Your attitude toward your environment and the miracle of life will be picked up.

For example, a middle-aged man whose career was suddenly interrupted by a fatal blood cancer had nothing to look forward to. All his ways had to change. But slowly he was able to ask himself no longer: "Why me, Lord? Why did this happen to me? What did I do wrong to deserve this fate?" but instead: "What is the promise hidden in this event?" When his rebellion became a new quest, he felt that he could give strength and hope to other cancer patients; and, that by facing his condition directly, he could make his pain into a source of healing for others. Now he does more for other patients than many ministers are able to do, and he also refound his

life on a level that he had never known before. On the distressed Ponca Reservation, we can learn that we are sent despair not to kill us, but to awaken us to new life. A family without hope in the future cannot live creatively in the present. Those who believe in tomorrow can live better today; those who expect joy to come out of sadness can discover the beginnings of a new life in the center of the old.

11. Use silent communication. They say actions speak louder than words. The late Metha Collins used to say "Watch your words."

We know the value of a friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief, who can tolerate not-knowing and not-curing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness. At funerals we are always tempted to say "Don't cry; the one you loved is in the hands of God. Don't be sad because there are so many good things left worth living for." But to experience powerlessness in the face of death says "I do not understand. I do not know what to do, but I am here with you." Be willing to stand silently together with those who grieve, without trying to escape from the pain.

Therefore, to care means first of all to be present and available to each other. Suffering patients and nations have declined medicine and food when they realized that it was better to suffer than to lose self-respect by accepting a gift from a non-caring hand. Children who are always taken care of but are never given the opportunity to give back feel useless and frustrated. All of us have probably experienced this with someone who will do for us but not accept anything in return. This feeling of indebtedness is likely to turn to resentment and anger. Your presence is a nurturing presence when you accept your children on their own terms, patiently and silently. You encourage them to take their own lives seriously and to trust their own instinct to grow.

A CONVERSATION WITH BESSIE LECLAIR

I asked Mrs. LeClair to speak about what her parents told her and how they told her things. I also asked her to tell me how they disciplined children.

She began by telling me about what constituted "good manners" as told her by an elderly person.

1. Be good to one another—show kindness. It will make you feel good. Do good things for others—help each other out. If you don't do right, you will worry, worry, it can make you sick.

2. Call each other by the relationship you hold with them, not by name.

3. Don't tease your uncle—he is your mother's brother.

4. Obey and respect your elders.

5. Appreciate what is done for you—thank people.

6. Don't smoke—that's what we got the pipe for.

Children were told things as warnings ahead of time, so no wrong or harm would come to them.

Parents talked more with their children. They communicated attitudes of right and wrong by relating stories to their children. They performed tasks together with their children and talked with them while doing things. Children helped out with things. They learned by doing along with their parents.

She told me about a time when she was helping her grandma dry meat. She said they were cleaning and piling the meat up when her grandma told her: "Whenever you dry corn or meat, move it around to a different place every now and then so birds and bugs won't recognize it and bother it."

At the same time, she remarked on a meadowlark they had just heard. Her grandma told her what the meadowlark said, and told her she would be able to understand them when she got older.

Mrs. LeClair said that training children begins at home, before they go out into the world.

As far as discipline went, whipping wasn't used. Use the voice—tone, pitch—to discipline. Withhold things from children if they do something wrong. Hold an item back from the child . . . maybe money. Value of money should be stressed.

Children need to be talked to in a good way, a kind way. Children know good ways, and therefore will know by the way they are talked to when they have done something wrong. You begin talking to them when they are small and old enough to understand.